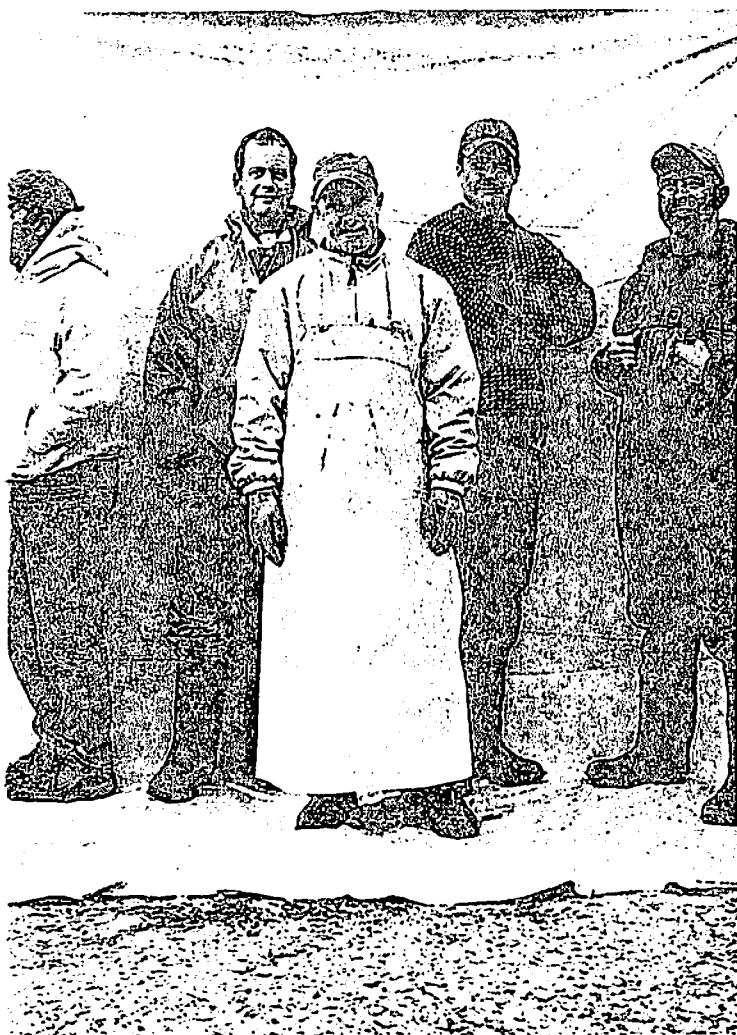


DUXBURY PEARLS: ISLAND CREEK OYSTERS

BY MICHAEL KIRKPATRICK
PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL PIAZZA



On a brisk January morning, Skip Bennett heaved the oyster drag from his 22' skiff into the icy waters of Duxbury Bay. The drag, basically a heavy metal rectangular maw with a thick nylon net attached, is briefly towed along the bay's floor within a section marked off with buoys that Bennett has farmed for 15 years. In just under a minute the drag is full with four bushels of some of the most sought after bivalves in the world: Island Creek Oysters.

The temperature is just under freezing and a hand numbing wind is beginning to pick up. Getting oysters out of the water in this weather can be a bit risky—if they freeze they're ruined. As Bennett's on-board radio (the envy of his fellow oyster farmers) blasts Bob Dylan's "Mozambique", the drag is hoisted, the haul carefully poured into plastic bushel baskets.

Bennett takes a look at his harvest, and moving quickly, sorts and tosses undersized and damaged oysters back in the bay. In the warmer weather, a damaged oyster will usually heal itself, but when the waters are this cold, many of the badly chipped and nicked oysters will be lost for good, part of the price paid for oystering year-round. The sorting is brief and cursory—the careful choosing and culling will take place indoors out of the cold.

As bad as the wind is now, things could be and probably will get worse. Valentine's Day—perhaps the most important day in an oysterman's life—is coming up soon and if the temperature continues to drop, Bennett and his fellow oyster farmers may have to walk out on the ice with chain saws and hand-harvesting rakes to make sure there are enough Island

Creek oysters to meet the demands of restaurants around the country.

A half hour later, the oysters are sitting in the bed of a pickup truck on the way to Bennett Lobster, a small storefront (a glorified garage really) that used to be a retail seafood store operated by Skip's father.

Island Creek, named after a creek in Duxbury, is a cooperative farm that consists of 12 farmers, seven full-time, who seed, grow and harvest oysters on 30 acres of the Duxbury Bay leased from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. According to Christian Horne, one of the co-operative's founders, there are two good reasons the state leases its waters. For one thing, oyster farms help restore health to areas that have become relatively barren by metabolizing nitrogen, which helps create oxygen-rich water. The abundance of oxygen in turn helps create an environment thriving with sea grasses and the creatures that live in and around them. The result is a richer, healthier ecosystem. The Commonwealth's other main interest is economic: Massachusetts aquaculture businesses now generate more than \$10 million annually in economic activity—well over half of that due to shellfish farmers.

Oyster farming is hard work, sometimes a bit dangerous, requiring a lot of heavy lifting often in very difficult conditions. And like a lot of farming, forces beyond the control of the oyster farmer can ruin a crop. As Horne points out, a well-aimed Nor'easter could create havoc, so could a disease-ridden algae bloom, and an oil or chemical spill could spoil the bay for years.

And then there are predators: starfish eat oysters, and so do creatures called knobbed whelks and oyster drills. There is even one algae species, *codium fragile*, which, according to the MA. Department of Agriculture Resources, "produces aveolated branches filled with gas that may actually lift the oyster and carry it off with the tide." Moreover, in Duxbury Bay, green crabs, which like to eat oysters, have become an increasingly common problem in the healthier ecosystem. But when the crabs molt—become soft shelled—they can become a delicious problem. The

trick, of course, is to figure out if catching and marketing green soft-shell crabs can be profitable for Island Creek—turning the problem into a bonus.

It takes about two years to grow an Island Creek oyster. Step one is selecting the perfect oyster parents, which are chosen for shape, size, and depth of cup. Near the end of February, the brood stock are sent to Muscongus Bay Aquaculture, a hatchery in Bremen, Maine where the company induces them to spawn in huge indoor tanks. By May, when they're returned to Island Creek, they'll have grown from larvae into mini-oysters, just two millimeters long.

The baby oysters are then placed in special underwater cages, called upwellers, below the Bay's piers where a constant stream of water is pumped over them, which supplies the oysters with the nutrients they need to grow. By the third week of June, the oysters have reached one-quarter of an inch in length. They are then dispersed into the Bay where they'll continue growing for at least a year before harvest.



When Bennett first started his aquaculture venture in 1992, he seeded the bay with quahog and razor clams. Razor clams are still an important part of Island Creek's business. Once relatively ignored by area chefs, these oddly-shaped clams are now on the menus of some of Boston's top restaurants, including Clio and Number 9 Park. After three years, as the quahog business was beginning to take off, an outbreak of QPX (which stands for Quahog Parasite Unknown) decimated Bennett's crop.

Bennett decided to reseed, but this time with oysters. "They told me I was going from bad to worse," Bennett says, noting that oyster beds in Wellfleet and other nearby areas had been hit hard by an oyster-specific disease. But the gamble paid off. And his search for oyster seed led him to Christian Horne whose family ran an aquaculture nursery in Maine. In 1997 Horne brought his nursery expertise to Duxbury and teamed up with Bennett to form Island Creek.

Although Island Creek has benefited from a few wholesale



distributors, the real reason the business has grown financially and in prestige has been word of mouth—one restaurant at a time. Bennett started to call restaurants (he still does), dropped off or shipped samples and hoped for the best. Some of Boston's most influential chefs, including Chris Schlesinger of the East Coast Grill and Keith Pooler from The Harvest, loved the oysters and mutually beneficial relationships were begun. Bennett says, in the early days, there weren't always enough oysters to supply the restaurants with all they wanted. He remembers Schlesinger telling him: "When you have them, give us a call." These days, Schlesinger doesn't even have to put in an order with Island Creek. Bennett knows what the East Coast Grill needs and simply shows up with just-harvested oysters twice a week.

Eating Oysters

The more we learn about food, the more detailed and precise our food vocabulary becomes. Take, for instance, the language we use nowadays when we talk about tomatoes. While in the Northeast will probably always justifiably dismiss out-of-season tomatoes as "mealy" and "tasteless,"

in-season locally-grown tomatoes are more than "juicy." They are "meaty," "tangy," "sweet," "full-flavored," "tart," and "mild," all with varying degrees of acidity. (A noted heirloom seed company describes one tomato as having "a complex blend of sweetness and fruitiness" while another has "an excellent bitey flavor.")

Oyster eaters, too, have developed a specific vocabulary, but this vocabulary takes more from the language of wine than it does from food. With wine, we speak of appellation, wine maker, and variety. We talk about soil and climate in specific regions of France, Italy and Oregon. We examine terroir. When we taste wine, we "get" citrus, hints of spice, and pears. If a specific wine grape, say Merlot, is grown in Bordeaux, it makes the wine take on a different—but not necessarily better—complexity than it would if it were grown in Napa Valley. Like wine, oysters, "take on the properties of the environment they're in," notes Bennett.

Virtually all of the oysters on the East Coast are the same species, *crassostrea virginica*, or, simply, the East Coast oyster. (There are a few East Coast farmers now raising *ostrea edulis*, an oyster from the other side of the Atlantic.) When an East Coast oyster grows in Wellfleet it tends to have a bigger initial burst of salt than an oyster from Barnstable. Additionally, if this same oyster grows in Pemequid, along the coast of Maine, it might have an almond finish. Depending on its terroir equivalent, an oyster can be "salty," "meaty," "sweet," "briny," "buttery," "plump," or any combination of the aforementioned. An oyster can have a mineral finish, with hints of berries, kelp, seaweed or citrus.

Duxbury Bay is actually a small bay within Cape Cod Bay. It has clean grassy, nutrient-rich water which is tested by the state twice a week to ensure its quality. The bay is shallow, but cool, benefiting from a steady southwesterly breeze that, Bennett notes, "blows the warm surface water away." As a result, the in-coming tide temperature drops by as much as ten degrees—ensuring its waters remain cool year-round. Because the waters don't get warm, they are less likely to become susceptible to oyster-specific diseases. (As Bennett discovered, cold water didn't stop the disease that kills quahogs.) Moreover, in cold water, oysters don't spawn, yet they grow as if they were going to. When oysters are fattening up, they load up on glycogen, a polysaccharide that is the principal storage form of glucose. This sugar is greatly depleted when oysters spawn, diminishing the quality of their flesh. (This is how the expression: "You should only eat oysters in months with an 'r' came into being, since oysters spawn in May, June, July and August, when the water reaches temperatures of 70+ degrees.) If oysters don't spawn they grow plump and sweet, and can be harvested year-round.

Picking the Perfect Oyster

Later that afternoon, back at headquarters, Tom Pena, an Island Creek employee, is standing at the sorting table, on which lies a three inch ring. He places the ring on top of an oyster. If it's less than three inches, he puts it in a basket which is set aside for oysters that will be reseeded. (Every farmer keeps a rotating section of his farm available for reseeds.) This part of the operation—selecting and culling—is just as important as the farming. Not all oysters are perfect for every client. Chefs select oysters for physical reasons as well as taste. Some might prefer larger oysters, some a mix of large and small, some are picky about the shape and color of the shell, wanting their oysters on the half shell to be just so.



Pena's hands move quickly, and the speed is important: he's got at least a dozen bushels behind him. He grabs an oyster, and mumbles "Per Se" putting it in a special pile. His hands move again, and he talks to himself. "No, cracked." And he tosses one in the trash pile. He continues: "Too small. No, cracked. Per Se." And each goes into a separate pile. Per Se, of course, is Thomas Keller's highly regarded New York City restaurant. The restaurant serves 1,200 to 1,500 Island Creek oysters a week in a signature dish called Pearls and Oysters—a pearly tapioca with Island Creek oysters and caviar.

Why did Per Se pick Island Creek's? "They're consistently good," says Jonathan Benno, Per Se's Chef de Cuisine. In ad-

dition to the oyster's taste, Benno says he appreciates the way Island Creek manages the bay, limiting the operation's size, emphasizing quality over quantity. Two of Per Se's sous chefs have visited the Island Creek farm getting a first-hand look at how things are done, giving the operation a personal stamp of approval.

In addition to Per Se, Island Creek oysters are served at Shaw's Crab House in Chicago, McCormick & Schmick and the Old Ebbitt Grill in Washington, DC, The Oyster Bar in Grand Central Station, and Rocky's in Detroit to name a few well known eateries. They've even been served at The White House.

Closer to home, in Brookline, the Chef-Owner of Lineage, Jeremy Sewell, has only one type of oyster on his menu: Island Creek. "They've got all the things you want in an oyster," he says. "Size, shape, brininess." Before opening his own restaurant, Sewell worked in several restaurants specializing in or emphasizing seafood. He noticed Island Creek oysters consistently outsold other varieties—so deciding what kind of oyster should be his oyster was easy.

At B&G Oysters in the South End, Island Creeks are always on the menu, along with a selection of at least 11 other varieties—making it a good place to sample, side-by-side, varieties from around the region. Chef de Cuisine, Greg Reeves, describes Island Creek oysters as "briny with a clean aftertaste." He sometimes will offer Island Creek oysters in two different sizes giving diners a chance to see for themselves if a larger oyster makes for a larger flavor.

For now, Island Creek is busy enough selling directly to restaurants and wholesalers and has no plans to reopen Bennett Lobster full-time as a retail store. In addition to restaurants, you can often find Island Creek oysters at Whole Foods or at your local fish monger. But if you like oysters and happen to be in Duxbury in the morning, stop by at the Bennett Lobster storefront. Someone is almost always there washing and sorting the early morning harvest. And all you have to do is ask: they'll be glad to sell you some incredibly fresh, incredibly good oysters. □

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Michael Piazza (www.michaelpiazzaphotography.com) was born and raised and schooled in the San Francisco Bay Area. In 2000 his photography career moved him to New York City. While working for such clients as Saveur, Food Arts, and The Australian Financial Review, Michael also contributed work to Slow Food USA and Alice Waters' Edible Schoolyard.

He has recently completed 2 cookbooks - Simple Italian Sandwiches and A Ligurian Kitchen. He currently lives in Watertown with his wife and two tail-less cats.